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ABSTRACT

Many studies of family relationships in later adulthood fail to take into account earlier experiences. This study investigated predictors of family contact and closeness. Data were provided by 500 adult children (aged 22 to 72) and 190 adult siblings (aged 45 to 96) of elderly participants in the Seattle Longitudinal Study. Subjects rated the closeness to their parent or sibling and indicated the frequency of face-to-face, telephone, and letter contact. Subjects' perceptions of their childhood home environment were assessed using six subscales from a revised version of the Family Environment Scale (FES). A majority of the respondents reported frequent contact with and high closeness to their elderly relative. Overall findings suggest closer relationships and greater contact frequency between parents and offspring than between siblings. Multiple regression analyses were used to determine the relative importance of demographic variables, FES scales, and closeness or contact measures to predict perceived closeness, face-to-face contact, and telephone contact in parent-offspring-pairs and sibling pairs. For parent-offspring pairs, significant predictors of closeness included amount of phone contact and number of years lived together. Predictors of contact included closeness, proximity, relationship type, FES cohesion, and other demographic variables. For sibling pairs, the only significant predictor of closeness was that sister-sister pairs perceived themselves as closer than other gender composition pairs. Significant predictors of contact for siblings included proximity, closeness, age, and marital status of respondent. (Author/LLL)

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Parent-Child and Sibling Relationships in Later Adulthood: Predictors of Contact Frequency and Perceived Closeness

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Abstract

This study investigates predictors of family contact and closeness. Data were provided by 500 children (aged 22 to 72) and 190 siblings (aged 45 to 96) of elderly members of the Seattle Longitudinal Study.

Subjects rated the closeness to their parent or sibling and indicated the frequency of face-to-face, telephone and letter contact. Subjects' perception of their childhood home environment was assessed using six subscales from a revised version of the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1981).

A majority of our respondents report frequent contact with and high closeness to their elderly relative. Overall findings suggest closer relationships and greater contact frequency between parents and offspring than between siblings.

Multiple regression analyses were used to determine the relative importance of demographic variables, FES scales, and closeness or contact measures to predict perceived closeness, face-to-face contact, and telephone contact in parent-offspring-pairs and sibling pairs. For parent-offspring pairs, significant predictors of closeness included amount of phone contact and number of years lived together. Predictors of contact included closeness, proximity, relationship type, FES cohesion, and other demographic variables. For sibling pairs, the only significant predictor of closeness was that sister-sister pairs perceived themselves as closer than other gender composition pairs. Significant predictors of contact for siblings included proximity, closeness, age, and marital status of respondent.

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Parent-Child and Sibling Relationships in Later Adulthood: Predictors of Contact Frequency and Perceived Closeness

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Introduction

Research in the area of family relationships in later adulthood has been predominantly with parents and children (Blieszner, 1986; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). Variables found to be predictive of parent-offspring contact and closeness found in the literature include geographic proximity, gender composition of dyads, employment status, social mobility, and marital status (Dewitt, Wister, & Burch, 1988; Harrison & Waite, 1987; Sundstrom ,1986). Factors contributing to sibling relationships differ from those contributing to parent-child-relationships (Suggs, 1989). Furthermore, researchers suggest that many studies of family relationships in later adulthood fail to take into account earlier experiences in these relationships (Blieszner, 1986; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989).

The purpose of this study was to determine the predictors of family contact and closeness and to examine predictors for sibling-pairs and parent-offspring pairs. In addition, this study investigated whether perceived family relationships in childhood are predictive of closeness and contact in later life.

Method

Subjects

Data were provided by 500 adult children and 190 siblings of members of the Seattle Longitudinal Study (SLS; Schaie, 1983; Schaie, Plomin, Willis, Dutta & Gruber-Baldini, in press); subjects were tested in 1990. Children ranged in age from 22 to 72 (M =42.4 years), their parents from 60 to 97 (M = 72.6 years). Siblings were between 45 and 96 years old (M = 68.5 years). At least one member of each sibling dyad was age 60 or older. All of the participants and their family members were community dwelling, and most of them were Caucasian. Further characteristics of the sample are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Measures

Subjects rated the closeness to their parent or sibling (who was a member of the SLS) on a 5-point-Likert scale and indicated the frequency of face-to-face, telephone and letter contact.

In order to assess the subjects' perception of their childhood home environment a revised version of the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1981) was administered. We included the sub-scales for the dimensions of cohesion, expressivity, conflict, achievement, intellectual-cultural atmosphere, activities and recreation, organization, and control.

Results

Descriptive Information on Closeness and Contact

The frequency of contact and ratings of perceived closeness are provided in Table 3. For a further breakdown by gender composition of the dyads see Table 4. Overall findings suggest closer relationships and greater contact frequency between parents and offspring than between siblings.

Predictors of Closeness and Contact

Multiple regression analyses were used to determine the relative importance of demographic variables (as described in Tables 2 and 3), FES scales, and closeness or contact measures to predict perceived closeness, face-to-face contact, and telephone contact in parent-offspring-pairs and sibling pairs. Tables 5 and 6 summarize the significant predictors.

For parent-offspring pairs, significant predictors of closeness included amount of phone contact and number of years lived together. Predictors of contact included closeness, proximity, relationship type, FES cohesion, and other demographic variables. For sibling pairs, sister-sister pairs perceived themselves as closer than other gender composition pairs. Predictors of contact for siblings included proximity, closeness, age, and marital status of respondent. Different significant predictors of face-to-face and telephone contact were found.

Conclusion

A majority of children and siblings of older community dwelling adults report frequent contact with and high closeness to their elderly relative. Geographical distance seems to affect only the amount of contact but not the perceived closeness between family members. Contact and closeness were found to be related, especially for parent-offspring dyads.

Of our scales measuring perceived prior family experience, FES cohesion was a significant predictor of telephone contact in the parent-offspring group. Future research should further examine, perhaps longitudinally, the impact of the history of family relationships (including siblings and others) on later closeness and contact.

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Table 1: Demographic Information on Parent-Offspring Pairs

Variable	Mean*	St. Dev.	Range	Special Coding
Age of parent (in 1990)	72.63	8.17	60- 97	
Age of offspring	42.43	9.35	22- 72	
Education of parent	14.49	2.87	6- 20	
Education of offspring	15.73	2.36	10- 20	
Variables in regression models:				
Geographic proximity	0.80	0.40	0- 1	1=lives in area
Age of parent	72.63	8.17	60- 97	
Dummy father-son	0.21	0.40	0- 1	1=father-son dyad
Dummy mother-daughter	0.35	0.47	0- 1	1=mother-daughter
Dummy father-daughter	0.23	0.42	0- 1	1=father-daughter
Marital status of child	0.65	0.47	0- 1	1=married
Marital status of parent	0.77	0.41	0- 1	1=married
No. of children of child	0.98	1.09	0- 6	
No. of children of parent	3.57	1.79	1- 12	
Educational difference	2.63	2.16	0- 13	Absolute difference
Education of child	15.73	2.36	10- 20	
Work status of child	0.85	0.35	0- 1	1=part-time or more
FES cohesion (of child)	17.79	4.75	5- 25	
FES expressivity	14.36	3.92	5- 25	
FES conflict	16.40	4.95	5- 25	
FES achievement	18.23	3.54	8- 25	
FES culture	16.27	5.27	5- 25	
FES recreation	17.10	4.44	5- 25	
FES organization	18.45	3.97	5- 25	
FES control	17.53	4.47	7- 25	
Closeness	4.15	1.09	1- 5	1=not at all, 5=very
Face-to-face contact	44.72	86.42	0-365	Rescaled**
Telephone contact	56.12	89.93	0-365	Rescaled**
No. years lived together	17.70	2.65	0-18.5	Rescaled***

Note: Total n=500.
* Means for dummy-coded variables indicate percentages.
** Scale was rescaled to approximate amount of contact per year (daily=365, weekly=52, monthly=12, etc.).
*** Rescaled to midpoint of range (never=0, 1-4 years=2.5, etc.).

Table 2: Demographic Information on Sibling Pairs

Variable	Mean*	St. Dev.	Range	Special coding
Age of target sib	68.73	8.38	48- 95	
Age of other sib	68.23	8.04	45- 89	
Education target sib	14.96	2.85	8- 20	
Education other sib	14.57	2.70	7- 21	
Variables included in regression models:				
Geographic proximity	0.54	0.49	0- 1	1=lives in area
Age of target sibling	68.73	8.38	48- 95	
Age difference of siblings	6.35	4.74	1- 28	Absolute difference
Dummy brother-brother	0.17	0.38	0- 1	1=brother-brother
Dummy sister-sister	0.33	0.47	0- 1	1=sister-sister dyad
Dummy brother-sister	0.21	0.41	0- 1	1=brother-sister dyad
Marital status target	0.66	0.47	0- 1	1=married
Marital status other	0.75	0.43	0- 1	1=married
No. children target	0.50	1.01	0- 5	
No. children other sibling	3.25	1.90	0- 12	
Educational difference	2.44	2.01	0- 8	Absolute difference
Education of target sibling	14.57	2.70	7- 21	
Work status of target sibling	0.35	0.47	0- 1	1=part- or full-time
FES cohesion	18.57	4.67	4- 25	
FES expressivity	14.63	4.19	5- 25	
FES conflict	17.19	4.69	3- 25	
FES achievement	18.77	3.55	3- 25	
FES culture	15.12	4.85	2- 25	
FES recreation	14.87	4.69	2- 25	
FES organization	19.17	3.58	2- 25	
FES control	18.08	4.12	3- 25	
Closeness	4.01	0.98	1- 5	1=not at all, 5=very
Face-to-face contact	11.79	38.77	0-365	Rescaled **
Telephone contact	25.87	63.94	0-365	Rescaled **
No. years lived together	13.50	4.80	0- 18.5	Rescaled ***

Note: Total n=190. Target sibling refers to sibling tested in 1990.
Other sibling refers to sibling who was part of SLS study.
* Means for dummy-coded variables indicate percentages.
** Scale was rescaled to approximate amount of contact per year (daily=365, weekly=52, monthly=12, etc.).
*** Rescaled to midpoint of range (never=0, 1-4 years=2.5, etc.).

Table 3: Frequencies (percentages) of Responses on Contact and Perceived Closeness for Parent-Offspring and Siblings

Question	Relationship: Parent-Offspring	Relationship: Siblings
Do you live with this person now?		
Yes	4.8	0.0
No	95.2	100.0
How would you describe the nature of your relationship? (closeness)		
Not at all close	1.2	3.2
Not close	2.8	4.7
In between	11.8	14.7
Somewhat close	34.4	42.1
Very close	47.2	35.3
How many years did you and this person live together in the same home when you were a child?		
Never	0.0	2.1
1-4 years	1.0	4.7
5-8 years	0.4	6.3
9-12 years	1.8	17.9
13-16 years	8.2	38
17-20 years	88.0	29.5
How often do you see this family member now?		
Never	1.2	3.7
Hardly ever	0.6	10.0
Every year	19.2	43.2
Every month	36.0	32.6
Every week	32.4	6.8
Daily	6.4	1.1
How often do you talk on the telephone?		
Never	2.6	4.2
Hardly ever	4.2	6.8
Every year	2.2	23.2
Every month	30.8	42.1
Every week	48.8	17.4
Daily	7.4	3.2
How often do you currently have contact by letter?		
Never	33.6	19.5
Hardly ever	31.6	27.9
Every year	14.4	31.1
Every month	12.6	15.3
Every week	4.6	3.2
Daily	0.2	0.5
How often do you hear about this person from another family member or friend?		
Never	2.6	8.9
Hardly ever	9.2	16.8
Every year	6.8	18.9
Every month	35.2	40.5
Every week	37.8	12.1
Daily	6.2	0.5
Total N	500	190

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to missing responses

Table 4: Frequencies (percentages) of Responses on Contact and Perceived Closeness by Relationship Type

Question	Relationship Type: Father-Son	Mother-Daughter	Father-Daughter	Mother-Son	Mixed Sibs	Brother-Brother	Sister-Sister
Do you live with this person now?							
Yes	3.8	1.7	11.1	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
No	96.2	98.3	88.9	96.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
How would you describe the nature of your relationship?(closeness)							
Not at all	0.9	0.6	2.6	1.0	1.1	8.8	3.2
Not close	3.8	2.3	2.6	3.0	4.3	8.8	3.12
In between	17.9	10.7	9.4	10.0	18.3	20.6	6.4
Somewhat	37.7	31.6	35.0	35.0	48.4	50.0	28.6
Very close	37.7	52.0	47.9	48.0	28.0	11.8	58.7
How many years did you and this person live together in the same home when you were a child?							
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	2.9	3.2
1-4 years	1.9	1.1	0.9	0.0	3.2	5.9	6.4
5-8 years	0.0	0.6	0.9	0.0	8.6	2.9	4.8
9-12 years	0.0	1.1	3.4	3.0	20.4	11.8	17.5
13-16 years	10.4	6.8	9.4	7.0	32.3	50.0	42.9
17-20 years	87.7	89.8	84.6	89.0	33.3	26.5	25.4
How often do you see this family member now?							
Never	1.9	1.1	1.7	0.0	1.1	8.8	4.8
Hardly ever	0.0	0.6	0.0	2.0	10.8	8.8	9.5
Every year	21.7	17.0	18.8	21.0	44.1	52.9	36.5
Every month	44.3	36.7	29.9	33.0	34.4	26.5	33.3
Every week	21.7	36.7	37.6	30.0	7.5	0.0	9.5
Daily	5.7	5.6	8.6	6.0	0.0	0.0	3.2
How often do you talk on the telephone?							
Never	1.9	4.0	2.6	1.0	2.2	8.82	4.8
Hardly ever	4.7	1.7	7.7	4.0	5.4	11.76	6.4
Every year	6.6	0.0	1.7	2.0	23.7	38.24	14.3
Every month	48.1	20.9	28.2	33.0	45.2	32.35	42.9
Every week	34.0	57.1	48.7	50.0	15.1	5.88	27.0
Daily	0.9	13.6	6.8	4.0	4.3	0.00	3.2
How often do you currently have contact by letter?							
Never	37.7	28.3	36.8	35.0	22.6	23.5	12.7
Hardly ever	26.4	36.7	29.9	30.0	24.7	26.5	33.3
Every year	21.7	13.0	13.7	10.0	34.4	35.3	23.8
Every month	6.6	14.1	13.7	15.0	14.0	8.8	20.6
Every week	3.8	5.1	3.4	6.0	2.2	2.9	4.8
Daily	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.6
How often do you hear about this person from another family member or friend?							
Never	0.0	2.3	3.4	5.0	5.4	14.7	11.1
Hardly ever	7.6	10.2	6.8	12.0	16.1	20.6	15.9
Every year	5.7	7.3	4.3	10.0	19.4	29.4	12.7
Every month	49.1	33.9	25.6	34.0	44.1	29.4	41.3
Every week	34.0	37.9	47.0	31.0	11.8	2.9	17.5
Daily	2.8	6.2	11.1	3.0	0.0	0.0	1.6
Total N	106	177	117	100	93	34	63

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to missing responses

Table 5: Results of Regression Analyses for Parent-offspring dyads

Dependent variables	**Closeness**	**Face-to-face Contact**	**Telephone Contact**
Predictor variables	Beta (unstd. b)	Beta (unstd. b)	Beta (unstd. b)
geographical proximity		.17 (34.66)***	.16 (35.49)***
age of parent			
dummy father-son			
dummy mother-daughter			.13 (24.70)*
dummy father-daughter			
marital status child		-.12 (-20.46)*	
marital status parent			
no. of children child			
no. of children parent			-.11 (- 5.64)*
educational difference		.13 (4.92)**	
education			
work status		-.19 (-43.41)***	-.17 (-43.80)***
FES cohesion			.16 (3.01)*
FES expressivitiy			
FES conflict			
FES achievement			
FES culture			
FES recreation			
FES organization			
FES control			
closeness	-------	.12 (9.02)*	.234 (18.89)***
face-to-face contact		----	----
telephone contact	.23 (.003)***	----	----
no.of yrs. lived together	.12 (.05)**		
Model F	4.93***	3.31***	6.36***
Model R^2	.20	.14	.23

Note: Total $\underline{n}$ = 485 (some cases lost due to mising data). Only values for statistically significant predictors are included.

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

Table 6: Results of Regression Analyses for Sibling Dyads

Dependent variables	**Closeness**	**Face-to-face contact**	**Telephone contact**
Predictor variables	Beta (unstd. b)	Beta (unstd. b)	Beta (unstd. b)
geographical proximity		.18 (14.92)*	.19 (24.28)*
age of target sibling			.19 (1.36)*
age difference			
dummy brother-brother			
dummy sister sister	.21 (.41)*		
dummy brother-sister			
marital status target		-.20 (-17.18)*	
marital status other sib			
no. of children target			
no. of children other sib			
educational difference			
education			
work status			
FES cohesion			
FES expressivitiy			
FES conflict			
FES achievement			
FES culture			
FES recreation			
FES organization			
FES control			
closeness	----		.19 (12.55)*
face-to-face contact			
telephone contact		----	----
no.of yrs.lived together		----	----
Model F	2.21**	1.31	1.84*
Model R^2	.27	.17	.23

Note: Total n = 190. Only values for significant predictors are included.
* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001 p